

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

Sponsored by the Virginia Green Industry Council

September 2006

It's the time of the season for ornamental grasses

By Jim May

Spring with its beautiful bulbs and flowering trees is a distant memory. The heat and unpredictable rainfall of summer is upon us and many perennials and annuals are suffering, but one group of plants is thriving and standing tall in the sun. In fact, they are in full flower and about to put on a display of fall finery unmatched by any plants except trees. I'm talking of course about ornamental grasses.

These herbaceous plants have striking flower plumes and graceful foliage that bring beauty, sound and motion to any garden. While I'd be hard pressed to say which group of plants is my favorite, ornamental grasses have enough of the positive attributes I look for that they definitely qualify. Low maintenance, motion, sound, fine texture, variegation, disease, insect and deer-resistance and multi-seasonal interest are just some of their positive features.

Ornamental grasses serve many functions in the landscape. Smaller varieties, such as Blue Fescue (*Festuca ovina glauca*), with its blue-green foliage and fine texture, are excellent as ground covers in a small area or as edging plants. The tallest varieties can reach heights of twelve feet or more and are excellent as stand-alone specimen plants for vertical accent. The popular Pampas Grass (*Cortaderia selloana*), while not hardy in all parts of Virginia, has very distinctive feathery plumes. Plume Grass (*Saccharum ravennae*), a hardy substitute for Pampas Grass, reaches eight to ten feet in height and creates a finely textured display of silvery-beige plumes that persist through the winter.

One major factor you need to consider when shopping for grasses is whether a variety is a clump-forming type or if it spreads by underground stems called rhizomes. Most cultivated varieties of grasses are clump-forming and simply increase in circumference, requiring division every three or four years. Some spread by rhizomes, popping up in unpredictable places and require controlling. Rhizomatous types make excellent ground covers, erosion-control plants and dense cover plantings that resist the invasion of weeds. However, they themselves may be somewhat invasive.

Division of grasses is usually best done in the early spring, just as new growth starts. Cut last year's growth off with hedge shears, dig up the plant and divide using a sharp spade. Add organic matter to the soil to ensure good drainage, water-holding capacity and high oxygen levels, and replant the divisions. To really become drought and pest-resistant, grass plants require a suitable root zone. In compacted soil, even the most drought-tolerant varieties will not develop a good root system and will require more frequent irrigation.

Container-grown plants can be transplanted into the landscape throughout the growing season. Keep in mind that root growth slows dramatically after mid-summer and plants will need more

frequent irrigation and improved soil to thrive. Fertilize by applying a complete fertilizer such as 10-10-10 at a rate of one to two pounds per 100 square feet. Keep in mind that too much fertilizer will make plants grow too quickly with weak blades, resulting in lodging (falling over).

While the most popular and widely used groups of ornamental grasses are *Festuca* (Fescue), *Miscanthus* (Silver Grass), *Panicum* (Switch Grass) and *Pennisetum* (Fountain Grass), there are several minor groups that contribute greatly to this family, including *Calamagrostis* (Feather Reed Grass), *Carex* (Sedge), *Chasmanthium* (Northern Sea Oats) *Hakonechloa* (Hakone Grass), *Imperata* (Blood Grass) and *Saccharum* (Plume Grass).

Fescue: These low-growing, clump-forming grasses whose growth slows in mid-summer need protection from the hot afternoon sun. The blue foliage makes a striking accent in the landscape and it is used very effectively as an edging plant or in rock gardens. Spring division and regular fertilization help to maintain vigor.

Miscanthus: This popular and showy group of grasses displays great variability in height, blade width, blade color, variegation and even flower type and color. From the low-growing Dwarf Zebra Grass with its yellow bands of horizontal variegation to the popular Maiden Grass to the 8 to 12 foot tall Giant Chinese Silver Grass, this group has it all.

Panicum: This native clumping grass with upright foliage in colors that range from rich green to metallic blue and change to tan and wine-red in the fall is a good choice for medium-sized grasses. There is much talk currently about Switch Grass being grown commercially to be used as an ethanol producer.

Pennisetum: Most members of this genus are clump-forming, warm season grasses with very showy, foxtail-like plumes of flowers. They bloom in mid to late summer and are excellent in dried flower arrangements. Some varieties are not hardy in all areas of Virginia and should be treated as annuals.

Calamagrostis: This minor, yet important group contains the 2001 Perennial Plant of the Year, *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'. It's a beautiful, easily grown, upright clumping variety that grows four to five feet tall and produces red-bronze flower spikes that appear in late spring.

Carex: These compact-growing (12 to 24 inches) Sedges provide great contrast to brighter grasses, perennials and shrubs. Leaves range in color from bronze-red to green to steely-blue to variegated varieties.

Chasmanthium: Northern Sea Oats provide great textural contrast to other grasses with their tall spikes of flowers resembling oats rising two to five feet on arching stems, blooming from mid-summer to mid-fall.

Hakonechloa: Hakone grass is a very showy, low growing (12 to 24 inches) variegated variety with bright gold and white markings that takes on a reddish tint in summer, complementing the red flowers that appear in mid-to-late summer.

Imperata: This plant has striking foliage that is green at the base, shading to red at the tips, making it a great accent plant. It is usually a well-behaved, 12 to 24-inch upright plant, but does tend to spread, making its import prohibited in some states.

Ornamental grasses can be used very effectively as single specimen plants, providing vertical accent and softening the landscape. When used in large numbers, it's almost hypnotic to watch entire landscapes of grasses sway in the breeze, displaying motion, sound and beautiful textures and colors. Any way you want to use this distinctive, graceful, functional group of plants, you won't be disappointed.

Virginia Gardening with Jim May is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.